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TWO DECADES UNDER THE SMITH-LEVER ACT

Radio Address of A. Frank Lever from Washington, D. C., on May 8, 1934 in celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the signing by President Wilson of the Agricultural Act. -- Broadcast in National Farm and Home Hour by 50 associate NBC radio stations.

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Three names will stand out for all time as constituting the Immortal Trinity of Agricultural Leadership in the United States - James Wilson, the father of the United States Department of Agriculture; the elder Henry Wallace, the earnest, ever-fighting, champion of the economic rights and equality of the farmer; and Doctor Seaman A. Knapp, the originator of a practical idealism in agricultural education and a new and unique method of teaching it.

These three were friends and neighbors for many years, interchanging thoughts, swapping dreams, evolving new ideas and working to the common purpose of making agriculture an occupation in which the sons and daughters of men might engage with pride and hope of reasonable reward as a return for the outlay of labor, capital and brain required.

The influence of the thinking of these three men upon the economic and social life of the farmer in their generation and in the future to come is as immeasurable as were the teachings of Luther and his contemporaries upon the religious life of the world. The doctrines of these men, especially those of Doctor Knapp, were based upon a militant, missionary, religious spirit, and the results have had not only a large influence upon the business, but upon the spiritual life of the American farmer and farm home.

Doctor Wallace Buttrick, in 1914, was visiting David F. Houston, then President of the State A. & M. College of Texas. Doctor Knapp at the same time was in Texas inaugurating his system of teaching agriculture by the demonstration method. Houston said to Buttrick: "There are two universities here in Texas, one is at Austin, the other is Doctor Knapp".

And what was the "Doctor Knapp University"? Upon what fundamental philosophy was it bedrocked? Let him say: "To develop the resources, increase the harvests, improve the landscapes; brighten the homes and flood the people with knowledge about helpful things". And again: "To readjust agriculture; to reconstruct the country home and to put rural life upon a higher plane", and all this to be accomplished by the demonstration or objective method of teaching, of having the farmer learn by doing.

Speaking of the Knapp System of demonstration teaching and the ends sought to be accomplished under the Knapp philosophy, Walter Hines Page said: "This is the greatest single piece of constructive educational work in this or any age". Another great educator said of Knapp himself: "He is the one great agricultural statesman that this country has thus far produced"; and may I add that he is the one great agricultural leader of this or any age whose every effort was fashioned to meet the needs of the common men of the farm and to do it in a common sense way. His scheme of education for the farmer was a democratized system directed almost entirely to the problems of the average farm and farm home. He had no fear for the perpetuity of American institutions as long as contentment and happiness were gathered about the fireside of the farm homes of the country.

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We are gathered to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the signing by President Wilson of the Agricultural Extension Act. That Act in reality undertook and does make national in scope and permanent in status the Doctor Knapp University ideals.

The idea that I wished to perpetuate is contained in one of his deliverances: "We are likely to forget some of the things we see; we will probably forget most of the things we read; but we generally never forget the things that we do". This is the nub, the kernel, the heart of the Agricultural Extension Act as it was prepared at the time and put through Congress.

During the two decades of its existence, the system has demonstrated the soundness of the principles upon which it was built.

Almost coincident with the signing of the Act came the outbreak of the World War in Europe, into which a few years later our people were engulfed. Armies traveled on their bellies; the cry for food, feed and clothing arose. The only organized forces prepared to meet this need, both for our people and our allies, were the Extension Forces. The hugeness of the undertaking did not deter them. The American Army was the best fed and clothed the world ever saw, and our soldiers may thank the Extension Service.

Then, came peace with its baffling problems. Great surpluses had been piled up under the initiative of the agents. Maximum price levels were reached. Agricultural prosperity was everywhere. Extravagant ideas were rampant. We were living in a fool's paradise and expected it to continue. The deflationary period came. Farm price levels dropped from the artificially high peaks of the war period to abnormally low planes. The County Agent again was called upon to formulate and promulgate policies not only to cushion as largely as possible the disastrous financial effect upon the farmer of this abrupt drop in price levels, but to meet the more difficult task of readjusting the agricultural thinking of the nation, warped severely as it was by the nightmare of the war period. He succeeded in doing both.

During the past decade, the acute problem of the Extension Service is the ever-increasing surpluses of staple agricultural products. The world needs all we have of food, feed and clothing. World statesmanship must find a method to enable people who need to pay for what they need reasonable prices to those who have their needs to sell. There must be found an adjusted balance of farm production with world consumption. Whatever may be the plans agreed upon, it will be the County Agent who will be called upon to put them into operation in this country. He has been the burden-bearer in every crisis which has faced American agriculture during the past two decades. He has been the spearhead of the attack upon every difficult agricultural situation. He has met his varied responsibilities with the kind of leadership that defies defeat.

And now, at the end of twenty years, it can be said with all emphasis and in all truth that our Extension Forces, men and women, represent the best disciplined, most practical, most loyal, most efficient and cohesive organization of agricultural leadership the world has ever seen.

It is the first time in the history of this country that agriculture can be said to have a genuine leadership.

The County Agent will continue to be to American agriculture what Kipling's hero is to the safety of the British Empire:

"For it's Tommy this, 'an Tommy that,
'An chuck him out, the brute!
But it's 'Savior of 'is country'
When the guns begin to shoot".

It is always dangerour to prophasey. But I take the risk to say that when the one hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Extension Act is celebrated, the County and Home Economic Agents will be found furnishing the leadership then as now in every movement whose objective is a more profitable agriculture with a more contented and happy farm population.

